The Assam Tea Crisis

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **The short version:** The Assam tea crisis: stacked climate, import, cost and trade pressure on a pillar of world tea. Why it means dearer, slightly different tea, not empty.

Assam is a backbone of global black tea, and it is under pressure. It sits with our climate and cost guides, beside tea and drought.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in May 2026.

Market and climate notes drawn from public reporting, correct as of May 2026; the figures are estimates and will move. Not financial advice.

The pressures, stacked

Pressure	Effect
Erratic rain and heat	Lower, less reliable yields and quality
Cheaper imports (Kenya, Nepal)	Intensified domestic competition, softer prices
Cost inflation (freight, energy, packaging)	Thin margins squeezed further
Trade and tariff shifts	Higher landed costs, buyers move origin
Large workforces	A livelihoods crisis, not just a market one

Why Assam matters

Assam supplies a huge share of the strong black tea used in everyday blends, so its troubles ripple directly into UK cups. It is one of the backbones of global black tea, which is exactly why a strain there is felt well beyond India. See the Assam region.

The stacked pressures

Several pressures are stacking on Assam at once. Climate is the base layer: erratic rainfall, unseasonable drought and extreme heat have cut yields and dented quality, and India's output fell meaningfully in 2024, with bad-year losses reported on the order of up to thirty per cent. On top of that sit freight, energy and packaging inflation landing on already-thin margins, low-priced import competition into the Indian market, and trade-policy shifts such as new tariffs. None of it is a single dramatic event; it is steady tightening. See

climate change and tea and why tea costs more.

Import competition

The Assam-specific twist is import competition. Lower-priced teas from Kenya and Nepal have pushed into the Indian domestic market, intensifying competition and softening the prices Assam producers receive. Squeezed between rising costs and falling prices, many growers, especially smallholders, have seen incomes fall even when volumes hold up. See Kenya and climate.

The human side

Assam tea supports very large workforces, so price and climate stress at origin is a livelihoods crisis as much as a market one. The most constructive thing a buyer can do is favour transparent, fair-paying, climate-investing supply chains, which is both the rational response and the one that actually helps the people growing the leaf. See tea farming and workers.

Why it does not mean empty shelves

For all that, a real shortage on UK shelves is unlikely in the near term, because supply is globally diversified and demand is softening as volumes decline. What you see instead is price and value erosion, smaller packs, fewer offers and quality pressure at the cheap end. The accurate framing is structural cost pressure and quality risk, not panic-buy. See the tea shortage question.

What it means for what you buy

The cost lands unevenly. The cheapest blends defend their price by quietly adjusting sourcing and quality, while transparent and premium teas pass cost through more openly. A drinker who understands this buys deliberately, judging by cost per cup and provenance rather than headline pack price, leaning toward loose leaf where it really saves and steeps again, and expecting a familiar blend to shift slightly in price and character over time. See is tea sustainable.

Common questions

Will my usual blend disappear? Unlikely. It is more likely to shift slightly in price and character as sourcing adjusts than to vanish from shelves.

Is loose leaf a way to beat the price? Often, because good loose leaf re-steeps, lowering the real cost per cup, which is the metric to judge by rather than pack price.

Is this just inflation grumbling? No. It is a real, answerable stack of climate, cost and trade pressures specific to a climate-exposed crop, not generic price moaning.

What is the most useful thing I can do? Buy without panic, by cost per cup, and support transparent, fair, climate-investing supply chains. That is the constructive lever.

What to buy

Browse Assam tea, judge it by the per-cup price, and value loose leaf (which re-steeps) or the wider black tea range. For ethical, climate-investing sourcing buy Clipper, Pukka or Fairtrade tea.

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (cultivation and trade)

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Brew well; it counts for more than where you buy. Careful short brewing can lift a budget bag above a premium one made carelessly.

More tea reading

- The Assam tea region
- Climate change and tea
- Why tea costs more
- Tea farming and workers

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
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